

GERMANY: Schroeder's criticism of media bias dismissed

German Chancellor transforms criticism into compliment

Dawn

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By Erik Kirschbaum

Berlin --- Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, breathing fire after staging the most remarkable election comeback in German history, wasted no time unleashing his wrath on the country's media.

Just moments after Schroeder succeeded in turning what in June had looked like a sizeable impending defeat into a photo finish in last month's general election, the chancellor went before cheering supporters and a national television audience.

"I'm proud of the people of our country who weren't shaken by the media's manipulation and the media power," Schroeder said of the result which gave his Social Democrats 34.3 per cent, just behind the Christian Democrats (CDU), who got 35.2 per cent.

"Those who tried to bring about a change in government have failed grandly," Schroeder shouted as he punched the night air on Sept. 18.

Schroeder's explosive attacks on the media are still making waves, although he and the CDU have lowered the volume in their wrangle over the right to lead the government.

Leading German news organizations and professional journalism groups have rejected the charges from Schroeder and several key government allies that there was a media campaign against him.

German publishers and broadcasters said there was no truth to his heated accusations that they had tried to influence the election outcome by writing him off beforehand or that they had played a partisan role supporting his conservative challenger.

"What more can you say about a politician who starts off as a 'media chancellor' and then ends his career as a media critic?" Michael Backhaus, political editor at Bild newspaper, told Reuters, dismissing Schroeder's accusations as absurd.

Independent analysts also reject the charges of bias and said it was ironic that Schroeder, who has used the media to his advantage throughout his career, was now attacking them.

"When someone who's been the media's darling for years suddenly complains about the media, it's news," said Lutz Erbring, a communications professor at Berlin's Free University, after Schroeder's searing attacks prompted German media to some public self-examination after the Sept. 18 election.

"Schroeder never complained before when he got favourable media treatment. (Conservative leader Angela) Merkel didn't get as much critical cover simply because she wasn't important enough. Complaining about bad press is what politicians do all the time. I think he's out of line."

Erbring and some top journalists said there were some examples of less-than-impartial coverage ahead of the election, but the majority of reports appeared to be even-handed.

He said mass circulation Bild had apparently tried to whip up public fears against Schroeder's bid to woo a relatively small number of ethnic Turkish voters who live in Germany.

"It was an irresponsible attempt to drive undecided voters into Merkel's camp by appealing to xenophobic sentiment against Turks living in Germany," Erbring said of a page one headline in Bild, with 12 million readers, four days before the ballot.

It asked: "Will the Turks decide the election?"

In campaign speeches, Schroeder repeatedly railed against an 'unholy alliance' of media and opinion pollsters who projected him up to 23 points behind Merkel.

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